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AUTHOR Franze, Sarah E.; Foster, Martha; Abbott-Shim, Martha
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to address the evaluation of the social service component of Head Start, through its main contributor, the family service worker (FSW). Sixty-six Head Start family service workers--arranged in 3 focus groups of 10 to 20 workers--from both rural and urban communities in the Southeast met to discuss the characteristics of the family services component. Literature searches were conducted to explore assessment measures that could be used to evaluate the characteristics identified in the focus groups. Findings indicated that family service workers saw themselves in a multi-faceted role. Participants identified important personality characteristics needed by family service workers such as respect for the family, empathy, appropriate boundaries, and non-judgmental attitudes. Further, the climate of the individual program, support received by the family service workers, and job satisfaction emerged as characteristics affecting the family service worker's role. Three specific domains were derived from the focus groups for further research: characteristics of family service workers, setting characteristics of Head Start programs, and job characteristics of family service workers. (Contains 18 references.) (JS)

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Assessing the Role of Head Start Family Service Workers

Sarah E. Franze, Martha Foster, Martha Abbott-Shim
Georgia State University

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Sarah E. Franze

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Since its inception in 1965, Project Head Start was intended to be a comprehensive program involving health, social services, and educational components (Greenberg, 1990; Lombardi, 1990; Zigler & Anderson, 1979). Its first planning committee, 14 professionals in medicine, early education, and mental health adopted a "whole child" philosophy of comprehensive programming and set forth seven goals aimed at underprivileged children and families (Zigler & Styfco, 1994). The first four directectly targeted the child's physical health, emotional and social development, mental processes, particularly conceptual and verbal skills, the child's patterns and expectations of success, and his/her confidence about future learning (Richmond, Stipek, & Zigler, 1979). The remaining three goals focused on both the child and the family. These included, 1) increasing the child's and the family's capacity to relate positively to one another, 2) developing in both the child and his family a responsible attitude toward society, while encouraging society to work with the poor in solving their problems, and finally, 3) increasing the sense of dignity and self-worth within the child and his/ her family (Richmond, Stipek, & Zigler, 1979). These last three goals underscore what is most innovative and fundamental to the program; the idea that effective intervention in the lives of children can only be accomplished through reaching not only the child, but the family and community of that child as well (Zigler & Anderson, 1979)

Thirty years later, Head Start has emerged as one of America's most pioneering and successful programs (Zigler & Styfco, 1994). However, due to some criticisms of recent years and federal legislators questioning the effectiveness in considering budget cuts, there has been a need to refocus on the goals,and efficacy of Head Start programs. The Advisory Committee on Head Start Quality and Expansion has reviewed these issues and proposed recommendations to ensure that Head Start programs will offer the comprehensive family services and high quality early childhood experience that are the core of the Head Start vision. (Creating a 21st Century, 1994). Two main areas of concern include 1) the quality of Head Start services provided, and 2) the need to evaluate components other than preschool education in Head Start (Zigler & Styfco, 1994).

The delivery of high quality services to children and families is necessary (Greenberg, 1990). However, the assurance of quality in Head Start services is a complicated construct due to the wide range of diversity of families and the complex array of problems that arise from such a diverse population. The changing needs of families and their children provide a unique challenge in delivering quality services. Washington and Bailey (1995), cite six trends in family life that will impact the direction of future services . These trends include 1)the feminization of poverty; 2)the rise in teen parenting; 3)the surge in the number of mothers of preschool children in the work force; 4)the increasing challenge for low-income families to attain economic self-sufficiency; 5)substance abuse; and 6)family and community violence. Others have identified similar changes in low-income families (Lombardi, 1990, Zigler & Styfco, 1994). The Executive Summary Report of the Advisory Committee on Head Start Quality and Expansion stated that although most Head Start programs provide quality services, the quality of programs is uneven across the country and changes must be made to adapt to the diverse needs of the family (1994).

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The second area of concern deals with the fact that many components of Head Start services have not been well evaluated empirically. Early evaluations of Head Start focused primarily on the preschool education component. For example, changes in children's cognitive functioning after Head Start participation has been extensively studied; with results indicating that Head Start succeeds in preparing children for school (Zigler & Styfco, 1994). Other research has pointed out the importance of teacher efficacy and an enriched learning environment to maximize social competence in Head Start children (Abbott-Shim, 1991). Although considerably fewer empirical studies have examined parental involvement, studies have demonstrated its role in creating positive outcomes for families. For example, Oyemade, Washington, and Gullo (1989) found a positive relationship with parental involvement and socio-economic status. Additionally, research has found that parental involvement in Head Start activities is positively related to mother's psychological well-being as measured by fewer reported psychological symptoms, greater feelings of mastery, and current life satisfaction (Parker, Piotrkowski, & Peay, 1987).

The purpose of this paper is to address the evaluation of the social service component of Head Start, through its main contributor, the family service worker (FSW). There has been very little research that has assessed the role of the family service worker and virtually no studies that have addressed the issue of the quality of the family service worker. Descriptive data exploring the various responsibilities of family service workers point to a common set of duties. Lazar (1979) delineated the main functions of the original social service work of Head Start: a) acting as a liasion and referral between the family and professionals (teachers, nurses, nutritionists, psychologists, physicians) and community agencies; b) serving as a counselor and advocate for the family; and c) developing effective parental involvement programs for families (Lazar, 1979). Since then, however, the role of the family service worker has shifted from its traditional roots in social work (Nissani & Garcia, 1992). For example, family service workers embrace the notion of guided learning versus dependency by providing opportunities for families to learn and to acquire new skills to foster self-sufficiency, rather than dependency. Family service workers attempt to affect the whole family system rather than focusing on one individual. In addition, viewing families as partners rather than as clients, serves to strengthen the role of the family service worker as an advocate informed by the family's goals, needs, and concerns (Nissani & Garcia, 1992). Frankel (1997) provides a further portrayal of the family service worker's emerging role as that of a case manager who facilitates linkages among teachers, families, and the community in order to address family needs in many areas including education, employment, mental health, drug and alcohol use, parenting skills, marital/relationship problems, and health issues. Moreover, family service workers facilitate services provided by other Head Start coordinators, provide referrals, make home visits, track the outcome of community referrals, and perform crisis interventions (Frankel, 1997).

These two descriptive studies also provide a foundation for defining the characteristics of quality service. Nissani and Garcia (1992) identified several qualifications which family service workers need to effectively perform their duties. These include listening and communication skills, ability to provide positive feedback, empathy skills, respect and nonjudgmental attitude toward the family, current and broad knowledge of community resources, and the ability to establish strong relationships with school staff. Similarly, as a result of Head Start's renewed commitment to quality services, the FSW is now expected to demonstrate excellent case management skills and to maintain values and effective interpersonal skills such as respect for clients and co-workers, objectivity, controlling one's biases, and maintaining confidentiality (Frankel, 1997).

Although this literature is a beginning, there has been little empirical research investigating how well Head Start FSWs function in their multi-faceted role and what specific characteristics of the family service worker define quality. This study examined two main questions in the evaluation of the Head Start family service worker component: 1) What are the descriptive characteristics of the family services component using personality characteristics, demographics, work patterns, setting characteristics, and job satisfaction, and 2) What assessment measures are available to assess these descriptive characteristics of the family services component.

SAMPLE

Georgia State University Research Center on Head Start Quality is working in partnership with three Head Start programs in the southeast to address the influences on quality, and the impact of quality on children and families. This present study is part of a larger study to develop, test, and validate a model that attempts to identify the characteristics that are associated with high quality in the family services component of Head Start.

The sample for this study consisted of three focus groups of family service workers from each of the Head Start sites. The focus groups ranged from 10 to 20 members each, and spanned both rural and urban communities of the Southeast. Sixty-six family service workers participated all together, 52% were Caucasian, 45% were African American, and 3% were Hispanic. Years of experience, including teaching, family service work, or social work ranged from 1-26. Education levels also ranged from high school or GED diploma to graduate school degrees.

PROCEDURES

To address the first question, we conducted focus groups with three sets of family service workers. Each focus group meeting lasted approximately two hours and also included some center directors and site coordinators. Family service workers were asked to describe a typical day at work detailing what roles and duties they were responsible for. They were asked to describe a family that they were able to reach and serve, and also a family that was particularly difficult to reach and serve. Family service workers were asked to talk about the process of connecting with families and what skills and characteristics were needed to accomplish this effectively. They were asked about the frustrations of their job and also the unique joys and satisfactions of their role.

Each focus group was audio taped and transcribed. The leaders of each group then organized the data under broad categories based on the issues which came out of their focus groups. Next, the data was categorized by common themes across all focus groups. Finally, common themes were collapsed into three domains to encompass characteristics of the family services component.

To address the second question of this paper, what assessment measures are available to assess the descriptive characteristics of the family services component, literature searches were conducted in the areas of counseling, personality, social work, job satisfaction, organizational psychology, and multicultural issues to research instruments that would best fit the characteristics of the FSWs. Instruments were piloted in the winter of 1998 and six were then selected to address the quality of the family service worker component.

MEASURES

Instruments that will be used to address the quality of the family service worker component address the three domains hypothesized to relate to quality. The Head Start family service workers will complete four self-report instruments, The Job Satisfaction Scale (JSS; Koeske, Kirk, Koeske, & Rauktis, 1994), the Self-Assessment Checklist for Promoting Cultural Diversity and Cultural Competency (Taylor, 1995), the Consumer Constructed Empowerment Scale (Sciarappa, Rogers, and Chamberlin, 1994), and the FSW Demographics questionnaire. The Head Start parents will be interviewed and respond to the Helpgiving Practices Scale (Trivette & Dunst, 1994). Head Start administrators will be interviewed and their responses on the Policy and Practices Rating Scales Score Sheet (Dunst, 1990) will be recorded.

The Job Satisfaction Scale is a 14-item, facet-based, direct measure of job satisfaction. Items are rated on a 7 point Likert scale. The three subscales include an Intrinsic Factor, an Organizational Factor, and a Compensation Factor dealing with salary, promotion, and benefits. The scale was developed and validated in a series of studies from 1980-1991 involving over 600 helping professionals. Alpha reliabilities range from .83-.91 and reliability of the intrinsic subscale and organizational subscale range from, .85-.90 and .78-.90 respectively. Findings supporting its validity have demonstrated correlations of lower Job Satisfaction Scale scores with later measures of depression, burnout, and intention to quit one's job (r = -.27, -.39, and -.35, respectively) (Koeske, et. al, 1994).

The Self-Assessment Checklist for Promoting Cultural Diversity and Cultural Competency (Taylor, 1995) is intended to heighten the awareness and sensitivity of personnel to the importance of cultural diversity and cultural competence in early childhood settings. Respondents are asked to rate the frequency of behaviors based on the following criteria, things I do frequently, things I do occasionally, or things I do rarely or never.

The FSW Demographics questionnaire was developed by our research team and addresses such questions as length of employment, education level, personal involvement in Head Start, and years of experience as a family service worker.

The Helpgiving Practices Scale (Trivette & Dunst, 1994) will be orally administered to the Head Start parents. The 25 item instrument measures different kinds of helpgiving practices that have previously been found associated with positive participant outcomes (Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 1996). Internal consistency based on mean item-to-total scale score correlation = .71 (SD= .12, range= .44 to .85). Coefficient alpha and split-half reliabilities are reported at .96. Parents are asked to indicate whether their Family service worker displayed the kinds of helpgiving characteristics described in the item. Each scale item includes five responses. The five responses from which the parent selects are different for each item, and were developed as to measure a continuum of helpgiving behaviors (Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 1996). An example of the items included in the Helpgiving Practices Scale include, professional helpgivers sometimes differ in how honest and sincere they are with people, which rating best describes how honest and sincere your helpgiver seems to you?

The instrument entitled, A Consumer Constructed Empowerment Scale (Sciarappa, Rogers, and Chamberlin, 1994) will be used to assess the family service worker's level of empowerment. This instrument measures several dimensions related to empowerment including control over one's life, achievement of goals, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Items are rated on a 4 point Likert scale, ranging from stongly agree to strongly disagree. Internal consistency based on Cronbach's alpha =

.86 (N=261). Evidence for validity was demonstrated with significant positive correlations found bewtween empowerment and quality of life. The instrument was normed on 271 members of self-help programs across six states. Program selection was based on geographical and ethnic diversity.

Climate of the Head Start program will be assessed using the Policy and Practices Rating Scales Score Sheet (for Administrators) (Dunst, 1990). This rating scale assesses the extent to which policies and practices are implicitly or explicitly adopted as policies and beliefs as evidenced in written materials and other information. The instrument includes items focusing on enhancing a sense of community, mobilizing resources and supports, promoting shared responsibility and collaboration, protecting family integrity, strengthening family functioning, and human service practices.

Discussion

The purpose of the focus groups was to learn about what the FSW is doing, their feelings associated with the job, and the families who they are working with. The focus groups allowed us to gain the perspective of the actual family service worker and also validated several themes which were consistent with the literature (Nissani & Garcia, 1992; Frankel, 1997). One consistent theme was that family service workers saw themselves in a multi-faceted role with duties such as conducting needs assessment, providing health services to children, conducting home visits, acting as a motivator and encourager of change, and maintaining various clerical duties such as computer data entry. Another theme related to personal characteristics which help the family service worker deal effectively with families such as maintaining respect for the family, conveying empathy (for example sharing personal, similar experiences), maintaining appropriate boundaries, and avoiding judgmental attitudes also emerged from the focus groups. The climate of the individual program, support received by the family service workers, and job satisfaction repeatedly emerged as important characteristics affecting the family service worker's role.

Based on our original themes from the focus groups, we hypothesize three specific domains related to quality in the family service worker. These include: 1) Characteristics of the family service worker encompassing traits such as empathy; trust and leadership associated with interpersonal effectiveness; multicultural awarenesss; personal job satisfaction; focus on empowerment of families; and demographic factors. 2) Setting characteristics of the Head Start program including resources available, level of training, support, and supervision provided, overall climate of the program encompassing factors such as professionalism of staff and management style, and 3)Job characteristics of the family service worker including caseload; type of contacts (phone, home visit, etc.); nature of contact (social service, health, etc.); and risk level of the families in caseload.

This study provides support for characteristics which enable family service workers to function effectively. It contributes uniquely to evaluating the component of family services by addressing specific measures to assess these characteristics. This study provides the foundation for a larger study which will empirically assess these characteristics of family services hypothesized to relate to quality.

Further research should look at the effects of FSW quality on families and children and characterize the types of families which are most well served, as well as those families who are not receiving the needed services. Ultimately, a model based on characteristics of high quality services related to the family services component should be developed.

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